DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 858 CE 069 169

AUTHOR	Imel, Susan
TITLE	Workplace Literacy: Its Role in High Performance Organizations. ERIC Digest No. 158.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-CE-95-158
PUB DATE	95
CONTRACT	RR93002001
NOTE	4p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Cooperative Programs; Coordination; Employer Employee Relationship; Job Skills; Labor Force Development; *Literacy Education; Organizational Development; *Participative Decision Making; Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *High Performance Work Organizations; *Workplace Literacy

ABSTRACT

In a high performance work organization (HPWO), employee basic skills are just one of many components. HPWOs feature the following: they flatter organizational structures, have work done by teams of highly skilled workers, and have a focus on quality, customer service, and continuous improvement. The collaborative approach to workplace literacy supports the goals of HPWOs in which workers are expected to be involved in the decision making related to their jobs. Part of this decision making involves management, workers, the union, and educators in a participatory process for planning, implementing, and evaluating workplace literacy programs. The collaborative approach to workplace literacy is based on these principles of good practice: there is no "quick fix"; all stakeholders are involved; process and practice are based on an empowerment model of literacy; workplace literacy initiatives accommodate and respect cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity; literacy is analyzed within the context of other workplace issues; upgrading programs are only one component of managing change; workplace basic skills programs are tailored to each workplace and its workers; and workplace upgrading programs should be voluntary. The limited research on literacy development and HPWOs supports the use of a collaborative approach to workplace literacy in a work environment moving toward a high performance model. (Contains 10 references) (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 383 858

Workplace Literacy
Its Role in High Performance Organizations
ERIC Digest No. 158

Susan Imel

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education
Center on Education and Training for Employment
College of Education
The Ohio State University
1900 Kenny Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1090

CE 065 167

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DIGEST
NO. 158

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Workplace Literacy: Its Role in High Performance Organizations

by Susan Imel

1995

EDO-CE-95-158

During the past decade a number of issues have been raised about the goals and purposes of workplace literacy; chief among these has been the debate surrounding the conceptualization of workplace literacy as a functional context program with its focus on analyzing the gaps between a workplace's literacy requirements and the abilities of its work force. Critics have felt that, too often, the job context approach was interpreted too narrowly and failed to involve workers. Frequently, the result was a curriculum designed to "fill in the gaps," usually through a top-down process with decisions made primarily by company management, human resources development specialists, and higher-level educational experts (Pritz and Imel 1993). At the same time, workplace educators were discussing how workplace literacy programs should be created, the concept of high performance organizations was emerging. Conversations began about how workplace literacy could be conceived of as a means of changing not just "the behavior of individual employees but of the larger work organization as well" (Imel and Kerka 1992, p. 4) by reinforcing critical thinking and teamwork required to transform workplaces into high performance, continuous improvement organizations. Sometimes referred to as the "collaborative" approach, the perspective that links workplace literacy to collaborative ways of organizing work—and that broadens the functional context approach—is gaining support (Jurmo 1994b). This ***ERIC Digest*** describes the relationship between collaborative approaches to workplace literacy and high performance work organizations, reviews some principles underlying the collaborative approach, and presents results of research on literacy development in high performance work organizations.

High Performance Work Organizations and the Collaborative Approach

In a high performance work organization (HPWO), employee basic skills are just one of many components (Jurmo et al. 1994). HPWOs feature flatter organizational structures, work done by teams of highly skilled workers, and a focus on quality, customer service, and continuous improvement (Kerka 1995). In addition to producing high-quality products and services, an HPWO also "provides a high quality of work life for all employees" (Jurmo et al. 1994, p. 4).

HPWOs need workers who can take initiative, identify and solve problems, make decisions, and engage in a wide range of tasks. Traditional basic skills such as reading, writing, math, and communication are important primarily within the context of these higher-level skills (ibid.). Although many organizations have not achieved high performance status, they are moving in that direction and are seeking to develop a work force with a broader range of skills (Kerka 1995).

In HPWOs, education and training are part of a strategic plan for continuous improvement, and goals for education are both long and short term. Also, "workplace education is more than remedial; [it] focuses on building skills for continuous improvement and flexibility (cross-training) as well as job specific skills (education model)" (Stein and Sperazi 1991, p. 7).

The collaborative approach to workplace literacy is one that involves a variety of stakeholders in planning and carrying out the program. Sometimes called an organizational approach, it recognizes that "workplace literacy and basic skills upgrading programs, alone, will not ensure that both worker and organizational goals around basic skills and communication are met" (Waugh 1992, p. 2). This approach supports the goals of HPWOs in which workers are expected to be involved in decision making related to their jobs. Part of this decision making involves management, workers, the union (if appropriate), and educators in a participatory process for planning, implementing, and evaluating workplace literacy programs (Jurmo 1994b; Stein and Sperazi 1991; Waugh 1992).

Using a Collaborative Approach

The collaborative approach to workplace literacy that supports a high performance learning model is based on the following principles of good practice (adapted from Waugh 1992, pp. 6-7):

- **There is no "quick fix."** Basic skills are addressed as a part of the organization's overall training and education strategy.
- **All stakeholders are involved.** A collaborative partnership with all workplace players is the key to establishing a successful workplace basic skills initiative.
- **Process and practice are based on an empowerment model of literacy.** Programs build on the experience, knowledge, and skills that workers and organizations already possess.
- **Workplace literacy initiatives accommodate and respect cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity.** The needs of the work force may need to be met in different ways to achieve the same outcome.
- **Literacy is analyzed within the context of other workplace issues.** Basic skills are examined in a way that shows their relationship to other factors such as communication channels, work processes, equipment, existing training strategies, and management style. Such an approach avoids "blaming the worker" by addressing other factors that may detract from worker performance.
- **Upgrading programs are only one component of managing change.** Because basic skills programs alone will not meet all the needs of a particular workplace, other activities are undertaken as well.
- **Workplace basic skills programs are tailored to each workplace and its workers.** The scope and variety of skills needed by workers varies from organization to organization and no one strategy or curriculum will fit all workplaces.
- **Clear language is essential.** All key workplace documents should be written clearly so that they can be understood by everyone.
- **Workplace upgrading programs should be voluntary.** Learning can take place only in a context where participants feel comfortable and have the motivation to learn.

An organization that is not moving in the direction of high performance may not be ready to support a collaborative approach to workplace literacy. A program developer could conduct a workplace needs assessment to determine the company's present stage of development and discuss these findings with stakeholders as a means of clarifying their goals and values in relationship to the program. If the company is unable or unwilling to begin the collaborative process of moving toward a high performance approach, perhaps another type of workplace education program can be implemented (Jurmo 1994a).

Literacy Development in HPWOs: What Do We Know?

Although a number of resources (e.g., Waugh 1992, Young 1994) are available that can be used to guide the development of the collaborative approach, little research exists on how literacy skills are actually developed in HPWOs. Young's (1994) study of workplace skill development among New York State's civil service employees supported the assumption that the move toward participatory management required more sophisticated literacy and interpersonal skills. According to Young, if the focus was only "on the specific skills embedded in these jobs we would be focusing on peripheral job requirements: filling out burdensome reports, studying cleaning directions, or time cards" (p. 41). However, the changes toward more participatory management "created some interesting new needs" (ibid.), including more sophisticated reading and writing skills, and skills to resolve conflicts resulting from participatory, team activities.

Another study (Hart-Landsberg and Reder 1993) examined the roles of literacy and teamwork in an automotive parts manufacturing company that was restructuring to implement a high performance model of team organization, worker responsibility for quality control, and a pay-for-knowledge compensation system. The study examined the formal and informal educational practices from which 480 workers, organized into 19 production teams (ranging in size from 3-88 members), learned and taught literacy skills. Its focus was on the literacy learning environment of workers with lower literacy levels or fewer educational credentials than most of the plant's employees.

Termed "skills-poor" workers by the company, these employees had distinctive sets of needs and motivations and "the workplace presented them with limits and opportunities that were different, often in subtle and unplanned ways, from those available to workers with more skills or schooling" (p. v). In the company studied, the skills-poor workers were at a disadvantage because (1) they faced two sets of educational goals—literacy and upgrading applied skills, (2) they were not apt to be selected for work in settings that structured practice in literacy and other skills, and (3) although sometimes promising, the teaching and learning strategies they experienced were not tailored for their educational needs. The researchers determined that "the skills-poor may have *constructed* literacy lessons in settings they encountered, but these settings were not *designed for* optimal skills development. Instead, they were tied to the needs of production, the exigencies of the moment, and the ingenuity and good will of coworkers for whom the teacher role was not always a priority" (p. 30).

Conclusions from the study include the following (ibid., pp. 31-32):

- Teamwork substantially increases the demand for literacy skills.
- Workers appear to develop diverse literacy skills in response to the demands for new proficiencies affiliated with teamwork.
- Team organization in the workplace opens rich possibilities for literacy education.
- The educational opportunities in a team environment can be both a benefit and a burden to skills-poor workers.
- The company that enhances its workforce capability by restructuring work and incentives for learning takes on many functions of an educational institution.

Conclusion

The limited research on literacy development and HPWOs supports the use of a collaborative approach to workplace literacy in a work environment that is moving toward a high performance model. However, a collaborative approach is not a sufficient condition for a company to be a HPWO, and neither must a company be a HPWO to use the collaborative approach. Rather, they are seen as mutually supportive. Also, as revealed by Hart-Landsberg and Reder (1993), a HPWO environment can still put "skills-poor" workers at a disadvantage. To understand the nuances and subtleties of how literacy development occurs, program developers must have a thorough knowledge of any workplace context in which they are working.

References

Hart-Landsberg, S., and Reder, S. ***Teamwork and Literacy: Learning from a Skills-Poor Position***. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy, November 1993. (ED 364 747)

Imel, S., and Kerka, S. ***Workplace Literacy: A Guide to the Literature and Resources. IN 352***. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, The Ohio State University, 1992. (ED 354 388)

Jurmo, P. "Report on December 1994 Meeting of the Workplace Education Collaborative." East Brunswick, NJ: Literacy Partnerships, December 1994a.

Jurmo, P. ***Workplace Education: Stakeholders' Expectations, Practitioners' Responses, and the Role Evaluation Might Play***. East Brunswick, NJ: Literacy Partnerships, June 1994b. (ED 372 282)

Jurmo, P. et al. "'Reinventing the NWLP.' Recommendations for the National Workplace Literacy Program." A position paper submitted to the U.S. Department of Education in conjunction with the Reauthorization of the Adult Education Act, November 1994.

Kerka, S. ***High Performance Work Organizations: Myths and Realities***. Columbus: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, 1995. (ED 378 422)

Pritz, S. G., and Imel, S. "Involving Workers in Workplace Literacy." In ***Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference***, edited by K. Freer and G. Dean. Columbus: Ohio State University, October 1993. (ED 362 663)

Stein, S., and Sperazi, L. "Workplace Education in Context: A Chart Comparing Traditional and High Performance Work Organizations." In "Tradition and Change: The Role of Workplace Education and the Transformation of the Workplace," by S. Stein. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Toronto, Ontario, 1991. (ED 345 103)

Waugh, S. ***An Organizational Approach to Workplace Basic Skills***. Ottawa, Ontario: Ottawa Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Association, 1992.

Young, C. D. ***Assessment of Workplace Literacy. Asking New Questions. Project REACH***. Albany, NY: Civil Service Employees Association, Inc; and New York Governor's Office of Employee Relations, March 1994. (ED 372 286)

Developed with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. RR93002001. Opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department. *Digests* may be freely reproduced.

CENTER ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT
THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
1900 KENNY ROAD • COLUMBUS, OHIO 43210

BEST COPY AVAILABLE